

HISTORY OF THE HOLIDAYS: HALLOWEEN

If graveyards make you nervous, and Jack O' Lanterns leer from every window, if the streets are full of monsters... Just relax: it's all part of the fun. Trick, treat, or a little of each? Let's turn on all the lights, and take a look at Halloween.

Ages ago, when history was short and winters were dark, tribes of Celtic farmers believed there was one day a year where the season of life meets the season of death, when malevolent spirits could rise from their graves and walk amongst the living. It was Celtic Ireland BC, and that day was called 'Samhain', the Celtic word for 'Summer's End'. On a day when so many spirits lurked, druid priests tried to foretell whether their villages would survive the winter. Ordinary Celts lit great bonfires, and disguised themselves to repel and confuse the spirits.

In the 8th century, in a likely attempt to distract the Celts from their pagan practice, Pope Gregory III established 'All Hallows Day', a day honouring all saints, known and unknown, on November 1st. Europeans accepted the new holiday, but saw no reason not to enjoy their traditional rituals as well, and soon 'Samhain' became known as All Hallows Eve. From there it was a short walk to the name we all know today, Halloween. Predictably, such a heathen tradition was of no interest to America's first Puritans, and so it, like Europe, was left behind.

Until the mid 19th century, when a potato famine drove over a million starving Irish and their folklore across the Atlantic and into America's port cities. An ocean from home and immersed in a cultural melting pot, their traditions began to change. The roaring bonfires shrank to lanterns carved from gourds, the first Jack O' Lanterns, and the Celts' demonic disguises became the sinister costumes of modern-day Halloween. The origins of trick-or-treating remain unclear. It is believed to have stemmed from a custom known as 'Souling', in which the poor went from home to home and prayed for the souls of each family's dead, in exchange for small cakes to eat.

By the early part of the 20th century, Halloween was gaining a foothold as an American institution. Mass-produced Halloween costumes became commonplace, making Halloween one of the most profitable holidays on the calendar, earning retailers billions of dollars.

Halloween's appeal transcends age, delighting both children and, yes, even adults alike. It's a day to step into costume, gorge on sweets, throw ghoulish gallows and scare ourselves silly. The truth is frightfully clear, not even a silver bullet could stop Halloween now.